Kill-n-tell (& all that jazz): The seductions of crime in Chicago

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Abstract

This article uses the lens of cultural criminology to explore representations of the seductions of crime (Katz, 1988) in Hollywood cinema. We use a specific film – *Chicago* (Miramax Films, 2002) – to investigate the cultural embeddedness of the emotional and sensual parameters that are said to constitute the foreground of criminal activity. We suggest that the stated aim of cultural criminology – to connect the phenomenal foreground of criminal acts to their material background – is laudable but that there is also a pressing need to connect that foreground to specific features of its *cultural* background. Our analysis of the film *Chicago* exposes the social circulation of important cultural motifs that help to make sense of why certain kinds of emotional and sensual features might be attended to in accounts of the commission of crimes.

Key words

cinema; *Chicago*; crime; culture; seductions

INTRODUCTION

There is a burgeoning literature, inspired by the work of Jack Katz (1988) and Jeff Ferrell (1996; see also Ferrell and Sanders, 1995) and championed most recently by Jock Young, that proposes to establish a new research agenda for criminology by 'placing crime and its control in the context of culture' and by 'viewing both crime and the agencies of control as cultural products – as creative constructs' (Hayward and Young, 2004: 259). The extent to which 'cultural criminology' constitutes a fresh domain of inquiry, rather than a logical elaboration of earlier criminological concerns with the microstructures of deviant acts and the microcultures of deviant identities is as yet uncertain. Part of the uncertainty lies in the fact that cultural criminology sees itself as being at the stage of

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defining its own 'points of orientation' and 'critical horizons' – as the recent special issue of *Theoretical Criminology* (8(3), 2004) puts it. Those criminologists who explicitly adopt the 'cultural' epithet acknowledge that they are in the process of producing (theoretical and methodological) maps of a terrain that *might* become an object of inquiry for a newly critical criminological enterprise. In particular, the mapping exercise currently is preoccupied with tracing the contours of rule-breaking/-making behaviour rather than colouring in the material shades of significance that different kinds of rule-breaking/-making behaviour exhibit (see Kane, 2004).

Notwithstanding that the project is described as being in an 'emergent' phase (Ferrell, 1999: 397), cultural criminology has moved in a variety of directions since Katz produced his phenomenology of criminal experience. In some of these directions, researchers have focused attention on the phenomenological 'foreground' of crime – that is, on 'its adrenaline, its pleasure and panic, its excitement, and its anger, rage and humiliation, its desperation and its edgework' (Young, 2004a: 13; see also Ferrell, 1996; Ferrell et al., 2001; Lyng, 1998). Others have focused on the cultural 'background' of crime – that is, on the media discourses and cultural spectacles of crime's public representations (Cavender, 1999; Morrison, 2004). Some have argued that contemporary culture is, in important respects, criminogenic in itself and that accounting for foreground experiences requires analytical engagement with 'dominant values' or 'sensibilities' imposed by the wider society (Pesdee, 2000; Morrison, 2004). Others have proposed that any account of the emotional and sensual intensity of the phenomenological foreground of crime must situate that foreground as a stylistic, ethical or political reaction to 'material' factors in the structural background of crime (see, for example, Ferrell's (1996) proposition that 'the meaning and aesthetics of clinical events interlock with the political economy of crime' (p. 170). See also Young, 2003, 2004b).

These different analytical vectors have produced rich accounts of the subcultural experience or mediated imagery of contemporary crime. To date, however, relatively little work has been devoted to exploring the relationships between the two. Exceptions include Ferrell and colleagues' (2001) exploration of the 'elongation of meaning' of BASE jumping made possible by the use of televisual technology, Websdale's (1999) excavation of police homicide files as situated media and, in a somewhat different vein, Meyer and Bogdan's (1999) discussion of the narrative persistence of messages about deviance in traditional stories. Each of these examples seeks to account for the cultural perpetuation of the meanings of crime – either synchronically (as in Ferrell et al.), diachronically (as in Meyer and Bogdan) or as a situated social construction of the two frames of reference (as in Websdale).

Outside of these few exceptions, cultural criminology has tended to operate a relatively strict division of analytical labour. On the one hand, Katz's (1988) framework for understanding crime's phenomenal foreground has motivated a diverse array of ethnographic explorations of the sensual qualities of the deviant instant. On the other hand, explaining the persistence of those sensual qualities over time or across space has produced a tendency to step outside of Katz's phenomenological framework in preference for social, structural or environmental explanations. Witness Young's (2004b) claim that deviant subcultures (and their stylistic foregrounds) arise in response to 'the

structural problems facing individuals in their section of society' (p. 554), or Hayward's (2004) proposition that 'if one is not able to escape one's social environment to engage in licit risk-taking or edgework activities, then one has to find alternative outlets to play out these emotions' (p. 165). A consequence of this division is that there is little connection between the methodological framework deployed to read or interpret the cultural foreground of criminal activities (in effect, a stylistics of deviant behaviour) and the methodological framework used to read or interpret the cultural background of criminal activity (in effect, a political sociology of late or post modernity).[1]

The suggestion, here, is not that there is, or should be, a seamless interface (either empirically or analytically) between the foreground and the background of crime, nor that different kinds of analysis might not be needed to capture the complexities of their interconnections. Rather, we are interested in the possibility of interpreting the cultural background of crime through the phenomenological lens applied to its foreground. Doing this, we propose, may illuminate some cultural dimensions of the emotions and sensualities that have been emphasized in recent ethnographies of criminal behaviour. We think it is important to explore these cultural dimensions in order to move beyond a purely psychological framing of the pleasure, excitement, risk and edgework of crime (see the quote from Hayward, above). It is plausible to suggest that the characteristics of crime's phenomenal foreground are already imbued with cultural contents and that those contents, as much as psychological drives, may provide the personal symbolic frameworks through which the value of doing deviance can be grasped.

The research programme that might arise from this proposition is both ambitious and complex and it will take a great deal more than a single journal article to test its utility for understanding crime and deviance. Our more modest aim in this article is to illustrate the potential value of such a programme by applying the phenomenological lens to one aspect of mainstream culture – Hollywood cinema. The present study is part of a larger project that is not aimed specifically at the particular concerns of cultural criminology. The larger project is intended to investigate criminological imaginaries embedded in contemporary Hollywood cinema with a view to exposing the ways that criminological discourses and popular representations intertwine in myths of criminal behaviour and motivation. Elsewhere, we have examined the 'con man' movie format in terms of criminological understandings of family dysfunction and the psychological motivations underpinning criminal careers (Tzanelli et al., 2005) and the 'criminal gang' movie format in terms of criminological theories of social disorganisation and the relationships between crime and the state (O'Brien et al., 2005). Here, we take a look at the 'murder movie' format with special reference to the phenomenological account of the 'seductions' of crime. Making seduction heuristically central to our exploration is appropriate because this concept is the guiding principle of Katz's (1988) book *The Seductions of Crime*, which, in turn, continues to furnish key elements of the analytical framework followed by cultural criminology (see Hayward and Young, 2004: 266). We will return regularly to Katz's work during our discussion in order to illustrate the entanglement between emotional, cultural and sociological motivations in popular representations of crime.

The analysis of film has been used in cultural criminology to highlight representational 'ideologies' (Cavender, 1999) and, elsewhere, to investigate the cinematographic and

narrative frameworks for developing subjective points of view on crime and law (Young, 1997). As we intimated earlier, however, we think that film analysis offers richer possibilities in the exploration of the connections between crime and culture. In particular – by applying the same level of detailed, 'thick' description to an example of mainstream culture (film) that cultural criminology has applied to the study of criminal and deviant subcultures – it may enable some progress in the task of co-articulating aspects of the sensual and symbolic power of the foreground and background of criminal experiences.

The film we have chosen to test this proposition is *Chicago* (Miramax Films, 2002, directed by Rob Marshall) – a musical tale of murder, celebrity and (in)justice. Our choice of this text as a focus for analytical exploration of issues relating to the cultural foreground and background of crime is not arbitrary. Rather, as we shall detail below, *Chicago* provides an especially rich and apposite lens through which these criminological questions might be explored.

First, the 2002 film *Chicago* is based on a Broadway musical by Bob Fosse and Fred Ebb but the story originates in a 1926 play (*The Brave Little Woman*) by Maurine Dallas Watkins. The play, in turn, is based on the real trial of a Chicago murderess named Beulah Annan who shot her lover, Harry Kalstedt, in 1924 but was subsequently acquitted by an all-male jury following a celebrity trial of enormous (American) national interest – comparable, in its day, to the 1995 trial of O.J. Simpson. The story was first put onto celluloid in 1927 (as *Chicago*, starring Phyllis Haver) and filmed for a second time in 1942 (as *Roxie Hart*, starring Ginger Rogers). Although the storyline is not contemporary – it concerns both something that happened long ago and something that really happened – the messages it contains, as Meyer and Bogdan (1999) observe of traditional stories, are very much so.

Second, the historical embeddedness of the film's story both in real events and in its re-presentation through Hollywood cinema and on the global theatrical and cinematic stage suggests that the tale's 'fundamental messages' are more than ephemeral reflections of cultural synchronicity. For reasons we will explore the story touches abiding features of (at least, American) cultural self-understandings. In this respect, *Chicago* expresses elements of the cultural diachronicity of such self-understandings. The enduring resonance of these cultural self-understandings is apparent in the story's commercial and critical success. Fosse and Ebb's Broadway musical version grossed over US$330 million between 1975 and 2002, won six Tony awards in 1997 and a Grammy for the soundtrack in 1998. As well as clocking up close to 900 Broadway performances, the stage version has toured Europe, Australia and South America. The 2002 film version is one of the 100 highest grossing movies in US film history earning in excess of US$100 million before it won any honours (Filmsite, 2005; Gillespie, 2005), and garnered yet more awards including six Oscars, three Golden Globes, and two Baftas in 2003. Consequently, we hold that this film stands as an exemplary re-presentation of symbolic themes in the understanding of crime and deviance that have resonated across time and space. In this way it enables the analyst to address important questions relating to the cultural configuration of criminal acts and the abiding, non-synchronous dimensions that such configurations might express.

Third, the film's account of deviant seductions moves beyond the immediacy of the

criminal act to explore aspects of why certain kinds of emotions and experiences might be oriented to as *reasons* for crime. In doing so, it explores some cultural values and modern forms of status, co-dependence, gendered identities, success and glamour and relates these to some vocabularies of motive surrounding the doing of deviance. As such, it provides access to a thick repertoire of culturally available tropes through which (non-instrumental and experientially embedded) narratives of criminal action are constructed.

After providing readers with a short synopsis of the film the article is divided into three sections. First, we explore the film's rendition of celebrity and the spectacle of law. Second, we unpack some of the detailed seductions of the act of murder presented by the film's female characters. Third, we extrapolate the film's account of 'murderous women' and how *their* seductiveness intercedes in the crime–celebrity–justice 'three-ring circus'. Our conclusion draws out some of the implications of this kind of detailed analysis for the project of cultural criminology.

SYNOPSIS OF *CHICAGO*

The 2002 version of the story is told through the imagination of the lead character Roxie Hart[2] (played by Renée Zellweger) whose desire for fame and celebrity propels her through a series of personal trials and (mis)adventures towards eventual stardom. What drives the story onward, however, is not Roxie's desire for fame *per se* but the impossibility of her realizing this desire alone. Although she yearns to become a single, adored, iconic celebrity she is forced to negotiate with, adopt and/or discard a series of partners who are necessary to her success. The first partner she discards (through murder) is her illicit lover Fred Casely (played by Dominic West), who promised to make her a star in order to seduce her sexually but then ditched her when he tired of the affair. The murder lands Roxie in Cook County jail under threat of the death penalty and becomes the basis for her later rise to infamous celebrity. But this murder is not the deed that gives the story its central contradiction and whose resolution is its goal. That honour goes to the murder by a female vaudevillian, Velma Kelly[3] (played by Catherine Zeta Jones), of her sister (for adultery with Velma's husband – who was also murdered by Velma) with whom she had shared top billing as a cabaret double act. Thereafter, Velma comes to realize that, to accomplish her own ambitions and plans, she needs a replacement 'sister' and Roxie is eventually steered to the same conclusion. The force that impels Roxie and Velma to achieving their ambitions is the transcendence or (sometimes literally) death of traditional ties based on blood, love, or marriage and their replacement by contractual ties based on self-interest, calculation and exchange. In this respect, underpinning the plot lines and narrative sequences, is a tale about the modernization of adult relations and, in particular, sisterhood.

However, the tale is not told with a straight face, so to speak. Instead, it comprises a scathingly critical satire on the cult of celebrity and the collusion of the American media and justice system in supporting and inflating the cult. With the kind of extravagant abandon characteristic of the musical film format, *Chicago* dances and sings its way through the corruption, irrationality and barbarity of media-manipulated 'justice.' The

bulk of the story takes place inside the prison where Roxie is incarcerated and in the courtroom where she is tried. Roxie's chances of escaping the death penalty are slim indeed until she teams up with the charismatic lawyer Billy Flynn (played by Richard Gere and based on Beulah Annan's lawyer W.W. O'Brien). Flynn's first appearance takes the form of a heavily ironic musical number in which he professes that 'all I care about is love', while simultaneously being tailored for expensive silk suits and being chauffeured around in a Rolls Royce. Notwithstanding the fact that he is surrounded by beautiful and desperate women, Flynn's interest in his clients is entirely mercenary – all he really cares about is money and the celebrity exposure their trials will provide. His strategy before and during Roxie's trial is to turn her into a glamorous celebrity so that the public will care about her: the more she is front page news, the more likely is an all-male jury to acquit her.

Roxie's celebrity soon begins to outshine that of Velma Kelly and, in consequence, a fierce rivalry erupts between them. Each wants to be Flynn's priority case, each wants the most media exposure, each wants to turn their notoriety into fame and fortune upon their (expected) acquittal. Roxie wins the media war and is acquitted of murder but at the instant of her triumph, just as she believes all of her dreams have come true, another murder takes place, the media spotlight swings away from Roxie and the cycle of celebrity begins afresh for another murderous woman. Now a free woman, Roxie begins to audition for cabaret parts but no one has any interest in her until she teams up with Velma Kelly (against whom charges were dropped), in spite of the fact that they remain bitter personal enemies. Chicago's citizens have no interest in one cabaret murderess but the novelty of a murderous double act has more appeal – for mythical reasons we will explore later. The film ends with Velma and Roxie performing on a glittering stage before an enormous and appreciative audience: through their partnership (based on rational, rather than traditional, ties) they have been able to turn murder into money and fame.

I'M A CELEBRITY: GET ME OUTA HERE!

> *And you get respect. Just for being famous. It doesn't seem to matter too much these days what you're famous for. It's just celebrity, and everyone wants it . . . Your life becomes public. That's where you exist now. Where you become real. But I tell you what, you worry most when you don't get noticed. It sets off a little fear, deep down inside, that you might just suddenly become invisible again. (Jake Arnott, True Crime (2004))*

The seemingly inexorable rise of the public's fascination with the 'well known' has not failed to attract scholarly attention. In 1961 the cultural historian Daniel Boorstin (1961/1971) launched a scathing attack on America's growing fascination with what he characterized as the 'human pseudo-event' – the celebrity as media fabrication, an inauthentic and staged form of fame lapped up by a hungry and uncritical public (see also Turner, 2004: 5). Subsequent treatments have taken a less dismissive approach, seeking to understand the phenomenon of celebrity as the corollary of cultural modernization, individualization, social fragmentation and the growth of mass media. In such a society,

celebrity becomes a central means through which individual identity, social status, wealth and the aspiration for recognition are negotiated (see Braudby, 1986; Rojek, 2001). In America most especially, becoming 'someone' (as opposed to an undifferentiated 'nobody') is a recurrent trope of the 'American Dream', and this dream is increasingly oriented around the kind of distinctiveness and recognition delivered by popular media – in Richard Sherwin's (2003) phrase, 'In the culture of celebrity, to be known is to be' (p. 521).

An overwhelming desire 'to be' by 'being known' can be seen as the satirical core of *Chicago*'s narrative. *Chicago* plays with the idea that 'celebrity' is an iconic cultural figure of western industrialized societies: its story is parasitic upon, but simultaneously attempts to deconstruct, this notion and the film offers a biting exposé of the desperate lengths to which individuals will go to secure their celebrity and the rewards it entails. In fact, an early comment on Watkins' original play described it as 'vile, immoral and blasphemous' (see Gillespie, 2005) and the story has lost none of its critical power across the decades. The opening scenes of the film introduce Roxie Hart's palpable desire to become the object of adoration that Velma Kelly already is. Roxie willingly allows herself to be seduced and sexually used by a furniture salesman, Fred Casely, because she is under the illusion that he is connected to show business: she thinks nothing of her adultery so long as it promises to yield her 'big chance'. Her murder of Fred, far from occasioning guilt or remorse, perversely presents her with an alternative path towards realizing her sole ambition: to be a star.

If the film depicts the desire for fame as pathological, it equally stages the public's reciprocal desire for the spectacle of celebrity and notoriety: the mass media-consuming public is represented as complicit with the murderous, amoral, self-seeking ambition of the would-be celebrity. With the help of her conniving, media-savvy lawyer, Billy Flynn, Roxie is transformed from nobody to an object of public fantasy – 'every man wants to date her, every woman wants to be her'. The public gives itself up to the seduction of fame and to a fantasy of what Roxie, precisely, is not: available, touchable, biddable. But if the 'real' Roxie is unapproachable, intangible, the fantasy substitutes for her corporeality an explicitly sexualized and fetishistic element – Flynn suggests the money-making scheme of a public auction, confident that 'they'll [the public] buy everything she's ever touched' including her underwear. While they cannot touch Roxie subjectively, they can at least identify with her objectively by owning a piece of her fantasy existence. This presents us with a perverse and sacrilegious inversion of the reverence once invested in religious icons and artefacts, exemplifying Frow's (1998) suggestion that celebrity increasingly takes on the mantle of religion, and Schickel's (1985) claim that the public's relation to celebrity is founded on an 'illusion of intimacy'. At a second, self-referential level, the film touches upon viewers' frequent and often sexualized fascination with stars – a phenomenon increasingly manifest in the proliferation of nude celebrity magazines such as *Celebrity Flesh*, websites with real as well as faked pornographic images of film and TV stars, and the tabloid trade in long-distance telephoto snapshots of celebrities caught unclothed (Turner, 2004: 122–6).

However, the protagonists of *Chicago* are celebrities of a distinctive kind – *crime* and *criminality* are central to their notoriety. As Penfold (2003: 30–1) notes, there is a

long-standing history of fascination with criminals and their acts. Early forms included those 'outlaw heroes' and 'social bandits' who enjoyed considerable public approval (see Hobsbawm, 1959; Kooistra, 1989). Penfold (2003) suggests that from the late 19th century these figures increasingly gave way to two new types of celebrated criminality – the *criminal celebrity* and most recently the *celebrity criminal*. The former denotes 'the criminal who becomes celebrated' while the latter refers to 'those who are of celebrity status prior to their crime' (p. 30). This distinction is felicitous, as *Chicago*'s 'femmes fatal', Roxie and Velma, each correspond to these different categories. Velma is already a celebrity, and the public fascination with her crime is predicated upon her existing status as a recognizable figure. The murders serve to heighten the public's interest in the private life of the celebrity, such interest (crossing the boundary between public and private) being central to the phenomenon of celebrity as such (Rojek, 2001: 11), especially where that private life involves some transgressive, deviant, or criminal element (we may recall here recent cases such as Hugh Grant's arrest for soliciting a prostitute, Winona Ryder's trial and conviction for shoplifting, and most notoriously O.J. Simpson's trial and acquittal on charges of murder). Roxie, in contrast, is a 'nobody' prior to her crime, and it is her crime itself (suitably 'spun') that propels her to the status of celebrity. As Gabler (2004) suggests, celebrity is communicated and sustained through the creation of a 'life narrative' for the individual, a narrative that can be constantly updated through new trials, tribulations and triumphs (such as a star's fall from grace, illness, addiction, romance, marriage, infidelity, messy divorce, or triumphant comeback). If there are available 'such durable narrative crowd-pleasers as sex or violence' (p. 5), this may serve to create a celebrity of an individual who was previously unknown and unremarkable in the eyes of the public. Roxie's journey thus parallels the real life strategies by which 'underworld exhibitionists' (Penfold, 2003: 33) seek out celebrity by trading on their criminal pasts.

The cultural economy of *Chicago*, in which acts of cruelty and violence can be parlayed into status and financial rewards, is alarmingly amoral, and can be seen as one of the most critical and unsettling elements of the film, which refuses to simply conform to the template of 'wholesome entertainment' once cultivated for Hollywood screen musicals. Far from suffering the 'just deserts' for their crimes, Roxie and Velma are not only acquitted, but mobilize their shared notoriety to form a successful double act. In the final scene they perform a number which references and celebrates their status as 'killers', as they exuberantly dance while wielding stage-prop machine guns which they use to 'blast' their names out in lights. This ability for celebrities to 'profit from evil', both in the film and in 'real life', can perhaps be better understood through Gabler's (2004) analysis in which he views celebrity as a 'performance art' – as such, it is judged by its audience in fundamentally *aesthetic* rather than *moral* terms. So long as the 'narrative' of the 'performance' is compelling by aesthetic standards (including such staples as betrayal, sex, violence and revenge) it will be deemed 'successful' by its audience irrespective of their moral reservations about its central 'performer'. Here we may discern again a second, self-referential level of social criticism in *Chicago* – it is a Hollywood film about how people increasingly judge 'real life' by the dramatic standards of Hollywood films, how the narrative conventions of popular entertainment increasingly threaten to overwhelm any other socially and morally appropriate criteria for judging individuals and their acts.

This aesthetic scaffolding for moral judgement – the narrative line from nobody to somebody, the compelling performance of 'who you are' regardless of the cost of your identity to other people – we suggest, is an interpretive frame deeply embedded in mainstream culture. It is a moral emotional resource for making sense of action and is attended to as a background cultural condition of criminal behaviour. Witness Katz's summation of Robby Wideman's desire to be a 'star' in a context where stardom is effectively culturally impossible. Wideman describes being 'in the [criminal] life' with all the pizzazz and zest of a Hollywood A-lister:

> *We the show people. The glamour people. Come on the set with the finest car, the finest woman, the finest vines. Hear people talking about you. Hear the bar go quiet when you walk in the door . . . You make something out of nothing. (Wideman, 1985, cited in Katz, 1988: 315)*

Wideman does not want the house and the lawn, the things that ordinary people (allegedly) want: he wants to be 'somebody', he wants to turn nothing into something, to transgress the line that separates the worthless from the valuable. He wants, in other words, what Roxie wants. But the identity transformation inherent in the desire to transgress is not automatic and does not transpire in the instant of the criminal act itself. Instead, it requires an audience, a stage, a cast and a sustained, not momentary, performance. The transformative capacity of transgression is a process that is only graspable emotionally and sensually because it inheres in the central institutions of law, justice and media. The cultural matrix of crime, not crime as such, supports the fantasy that something can be made out of nothing and that the something fabricated is a personally valuable good.

We will return to the relationship between the 'somebody' and the 'nobody' in the final section of the article. Here, we want to make two observations about this fantastical connection between identity and crime.

First, Robby Wideman's description of his personal worth and the value of his criminal identity can be seen as a fully *cultural* articulation of a recurring trope of the 'American Dream'. It is not only a logical elaboration of the sensuality of criminal behaviour. The desire to put on display women, cars, 'vines' – to be an awesome self in whose presence reverential silence is appropriate – only makes sense, we suggest, when it is placed in the context of a culture that is infused with the personal value of celebrity. The particular pleasures or satisfactions of doing deviance provide only a limited explanation of its seductions. This observation is tentatively explored by Katz in his discussion of ethnic, class and gender dimensions of criminal behaviour. But we think that the enculturation of seduction can be taken further than this. The seduction of being a 'somebody', and in what that seduction culturally consists, may also be important in accounting for criminal motivations and experiences.

This leads directly to the second observation. In the synchronicity of being 'in the life,' as Wideman puts it – that is, in the day-to-day practices, interpretations, decisions and desires that give meaning and substance to that life – subsist elements of much larger cultural contexts: ones that endure diachronically in unfolding narratives about crime and in the complicit symbolic kinships that connect crime, justice and media around the value,

in this case, of being someone other than who you are. The striking parallels that can be discerned between the motivations and aspirations of Katz's exemplars and the symbolic constellations through which *Chicago*'s protagonists convey their desired identities suggest that there are reasons for the emergence and persistence of these cognitive rationales that lie outside both the urgent and immediate instantaneity of the criminal act and the mundane realities of social existence in particular subcultures. Indeed, the contents of *constructions* of gender, class and 'race' may themselves be influential factors in the particular forms through which criminal desires are articulated. We explore one further example of this kind of symbolic articulation of crime's foreground before analysing the seductions and repulsions of sexuality.

'I BET YA YOU WOULDA DONE THE SAME'

Roxie Hart's plight is the same as that of the six 'merry murderesses' of Cook County jail (nicknamed Pop, Six, Squish, Ah-Ah, Cicero,[4] Lipschitz) – all of whom have killed intimate (male) partners. The reasons for their crimes appear, sometimes, trivial – one murdered her husband for constantly popping gum, another for infidelity, another for bigamy – but the emotional intensity of, rather than the reasons for, their murderous acts is what interests us here. This intensity is captured in a song-and-dance routine called the 'Cellblock Tango'. The routine is a clear riposte to Elvis Presley's 'Jailhouse Rock': the background sets borrow from that famous scene and the scantily-clad, silhouetted female dancers writhe to a tango beat behind shadow bars stacked in columns as the routine nears its climax. However, whilst it is possible to rock alone, it always takes two to tango and it is the sense of the victims' own involvement and culpability in the women's crimes that the song and dance is intended to expose. 'Pop' (the nickname of the gum-popping husband killer) relates that she arrives home 'feeling really irritated and looking for a little bit of sympathy' only to find her couch-dwelling, beer-swilling husband indifferent, uncaring and, as always, popping gum. She warns him not to pop the gum again and when he persists she takes a shotgun and fires 'two warning shots . . . into his head' and the whole dance troupe choruses: 'He had it coming/he only had himself to blame/if youda been there, if youda seen it/I bet ya you woulda done the same'.

Another inmate, 'Squish', recounts how her husband stormed into the kitchen in a jealous rage, accusing her of sleeping with the milkman and that 'he ran onto my knife, he ran onto my knife ten times' while the troupe choruses, 'It was a murder but not a crime'. Each of the inmates relates their murderous actions in turn[5] until, in the song's finale, the dance troupe sings along with Cicero's defence that: 'I didn't do it/but if I'd done it/how can you tell me that I was wrong?'.

The whole routine sets out to construct a universal 'you' – a judge and jury of everyday life – that is able to grasp the contexts in which murderous actions occur, that can understand how murder might be committed in a way that is not criminal. Each inmate seeks to infuse their crimes with a sense of defending the good, to expose the righteousness of what they did by construing their acts as what *had* to be done at that moment, in that context, regardless of the legal ramifications of those acts. The humiliation, disgrace and

dishonour inflicted by the victims' chosen courses of action *necessitated* their demise: they all brought it on themselves.

Note, here, that Katz's evocation of the moral emotions lurking within 'righteous slaughter' (of husbands, wives, lovers, children) evokes precisely this sense of the breaking point where deep-seated frustrations and humiliations erupt into a transcendent rage over sometimes petty and inconsequential conflicts (such as popping gum) and the perpetrator senses a 'logically smooth coherence in the transition from one compulsion [humiliation] to another [violent rage]' (Katz, 1988: 23). He goes on to explore the sensual qualities of the spaces (homes, favourite bars, for example) and times (weekends, holidays, for example) where these intimate murders often occur, commenting that, among other things, they tend to be characterized as times and spaces of refuge and escape from wider social territories of degradation, humiliation and frustration (notably work settings). In those contexts, at those times, suggests Katz, the killer needs the 'moral artifact' of righteousness in order that violent murder can work existentially as an escape: the artefact is not a *post-facto* justification for the act but a nucleus of the act itself. Moreover, the structure of the murderous acts, as rendered by *Chicago*'s cell block tangoists, is continuous with the details of righteous slaughters described by Katz. 'In all cases,' he writes, 'the victim sustains a sense in the killer-to-be that there is no escape from the situation at hand' (pp. 20, 48). The conflict that spills into intimate murder is often oriented to as an inevitable last stand in which some victims even 'ran against the gun as the women were firing' – an observation that suggests that Squish's defence (that her husband ran onto her knife ten times) is not as ludicrous as it might at first appear.

Whilst *Chicago* fictionalizes the characters, contexts and events surrounding intimate murders we suggest it is instructive, on two levels, that the women's murderous motivations are filled in with precisely the same emotional and sensuous sequences identified by Katz in his phenomenology of righteous slaughter. On a first level, the meaning and power of the emotional intensity of intimate murder clearly circulates outside the immediacy of the murderous act. It is an embedded element of murder *narratives* – as told both by the individuals in Katz's case studies and as relayed at a wider cultural level through, in this instance, popular film. The intensity of 'humiliation' or 'rage', for example, articulates both cognitive *and* symbolic powers in the cultural construction of the compulsions contained within the murderous instant. These emotions and impulses provide for a synchrony of contextualized behaviour in narrative terms and are oriented to as such both by Katz's exemplars and by the singing and dancing protagonists of *Chicago*'s story of celebrity. We are not suggesting that there is a direct cultural homology between some characters in a Hollywood film and some desperate murderers in London or Los Angeles or anywhere else. Rather, our tentative suggestion is that the emotional infrastructure of criminal activities (in this case, murder) has an *extensional* (symbolic) plane as well as an *intensional* (cognitive) plane and that a criminology that is sensitive to cultural forces and circumstances might profitably utilize the foreground of criminality to read and interpret its cultural background in these terms.

Moreover, the tale that *Chicago* tells – albeit with important variations – has resonated with different audiences in different times and places. This historical and sociological resonance suggests that, like the traditional stories discussed by Meyer and Bogdan

(1999), the tale's 'fundamental messages' express aspects of the diachronic endurance of the meanings of crime – in this case, the emotional intensity of intimate murder – as *cultural* and not only *cognitive* artefacts. At the diachronic level of culture – in the persistence (and change) of narratives, messages and symbolic constellations over time – humiliation, rage, righteousness, and so on, can be seen as cultural questions about criminality as well as instantaneous motivations. *Chicago*'s sequential generational appeal may indicate something about how (and why) these emotions articulate modern understandings of the sensuality and intensity of deviant behaviours. As we noted earlier, this possibility arises because, in popular cultural products, the power of these emotions is invariably contextualized through constructions of gender, class, sexuality and 'race' as limiting or enabling forces that give sociological substance to the contents of deviant behaviours. In the final section of the article we explore aspects of this symbolic contextualization with specific reference to the seductions of sexuality.

SEX/CRIME

It is a novel attribute of *Chicago* that the tale it tells concerns women's criminality and that, at first sight, the tale appears to be told from a woman's point of view. However, it can also be noted that criminality is used to explore different 'types' of female sexuality embodied by the story's two protagonists, Velma and Roxie. These 'types' enact a double function in the narrative. On a first level, they draw upon, and then deconstruct, cinematic representations of 'dangerous women' (or women as 'danger') that belong to previous eras. In this way they become a satire of past social norms and expectations regarding gender roles. But, on a second level, the feminization of crime in *Chicago* also signifies a conservative discourse of female attractiveness as dangerous and potentially 'criminal' in so far as it threatens social order (see also Doane, 1991: 2). In short, *Chicago*'s tale of 'deadly' female sexuality both undermines and reinstates conservative discourses concerning the place of women in society (see Ryan and Kellner, 1990; Best and Kellner, 1991). In this way, the film's staging of women–crime–sexuality literally performs the contradictory emotional attachments and desires embedded in the male look at women's activity/passivity. The foundation for the performance of this contradiction is laid down in the characterization of the two female leads.

Velma Kelly is played by well-known Hollywood 'beauty' Catherine Zeta-Jones. Zeta-Jones perfects the star-as-sign model (Dyer, 1982): she is a famous woman whose public personality is described as 'passionate' and 'fiery', and is an emblematic reference of stardom in *Chicago* in a suggestive way, linking together dimensions of her own 'real' celebrity, with the fantasy of celebrity portrayed in the film. In many ways, Zeta-Jones's role in *Chicago* recuperates her previous screen performances. She played Sheherazade, the enchanting storyteller, in *Les 1001 Nuits* (1990), the apple of discord in *Splitting Heirs* (1993), the promiscuous country belle in *The Cinder Path* (1994) the female criminal in *Entrapment* (1999) and the cold-blooded star in *America's Sweethearts* (2001). In *Chicago*, Velma Kelly is a 'woman of the world', eloquent, successful in her stage career, but also temperamental, competitive and manipulative. Along with all of the other merry

murderesses, she is utterly devoid of guilt for her crime and exhibits all of the characteristics of the *femme fatale* found in neo-noir cinema of the post-war period. The *femmes fatales* of this cinematic genre embody 'pure evil, with sexuality and greed [as] the primary markers of their character' (Rich, 1995: 8; see also Maxfield, 1996). This embodiment of evil points to the history of European cinema and its imaginary, fear-provoking women. On closer inspection, for example, Velma's fair skin, sheer black hair cut short, and alluringly skimpy dark attire become a reference to the 1920s cinematic icon and cult figure Louise Brooks. Between 1925 and 1938 Brooks appeared in over 20 films, working with famous directors and displaying a talent that was not fully appreciated at the time because of her strong personality and rebellious nature.[6] In this regard, Velma is exactly what she looks like: a dangerous, strong, confident, highly sexed celebrity.

The blonde Roxie (Renée Zellweger) that the film introduces in the opening scenes appears to be very different from the dark Velma. As Velma performs a seductive and sexually charged version of 'All That Jazz' in the foreground, Roxie watches from a shadowed corner in the background of the cabaret club, dreaming of herself as a glamorous star. Roxie's introduction to the film's audience thus evokes a gap between her imagined and desired identity, on the one hand, and her real and situated identity, on the other. The question to the audience is, then, how can/will Roxie close the gap between the desired and the situated identity: will she (and, if so, how) transpose the desire from the (imagined) background to the (real) foreground of her life? Can she become *like* Velma without *becoming* Velma? Following the conventions of the original film *noir*, Roxie seems to typify the *femme attrapée* (Wager, 1999: 15), the woman who, trapped in social conventions, yet threatened by their transgression, offers herself as a possibility for male redemption from the evil *femme fatale*. Before the question of Roxie's journey towards a new identity can settle, however, the film demonstrates that nothing is as it seems – what is a 'good girl' doing in the sex and booze saturated environment of the cabaret club, after all? Her sexual games with her boyfriend in the dark streets of Chicago, their frenzied love making, and the audience's realization that she is already married (and cheating on her husband) portray a different character from the one that the opening scene seemed to suggest. Roxie, in fact, is already on her way to becoming Velma – a process only reinforced when she murders her lover not out of passion but in a rage at the recognition that her attempt to exchange sex for celebrity has been thwarted and she has been outmanipulated: inside the 'good girl' is a 'bad woman' manoeuvring her way out.

Despite the burgeoning similarities between the two women, there are also conspicuous differences: Velma's cool personality, her eloquence and cold-blooded calculation, are contrasted to Roxie's naïvety. Indeed, Roxie's simplicity is stressed throughout her introduction to prison culture after arrest: she asks the warden (Mama, played by Queen Latifah) for extra blankets without realizing that, in prison, everything comes at a price, she tries unsuccessfully to befriend Velma by running errands and she is ready to tell the truth to the police about her crime without considering the fatal consequences. At this stage, Roxie's persona is a reference to the almost universal stereotype of the 'dumb blonde'. As Richard Dyer (1979) argues, the dumb blonde is by tradition natural, untouched by the rationality of the world, devoid of knowledge about sexuality. Only after Roxie's initiation to the tricks and strategies of crime trials by her lawyer does she begin

to wise up. Slowly, she comes to understand that celebrity is based on deceit: that the guise of celebrity *is* celebrity, the mantle of glamour *is* glamour and she grasps the new reality with all the might at her disposal. As her story unfolds, Roxie is glamourized to such an extent that she ends up looking (and acting) like the sexual symbol *par excellence*: Marilyn Monroe. *Again* this reference is not coincidental because in the 1950s and 1960s Monroe signified the dumb blonde who, unlike the femme fatale of film *noir*, could not threaten male domination. Roxie's desirability becomes more remote as the film progresses – in fact, its smooth, non-dangerous quality (that is always addressed to the lens, to the male gaze) almost makes us forget that this woman is guilty of murder. It takes some time to realize that it is the straightforwardly aggressive Velma who committed a crime of passion, not Roxie who shot her lover when he broke his contractual bargain. Thus, the supposedly non-dangerous Roxie–Monroe of male fantasies is the real deadly woman in disguise. *Chicago* inverts the stereotype of the harmless 'sex bomb' of the 1950s by counterposing Roxie's blonde appeal to Velma's more straightforward, dark dangerousness.

The filmic narrative, then, proffers two different kinds of female beauty: a 'foreign' beauty, recalling the impact of early European cinema on constructions of the dark side of women's sexual availability, and an 'American' beauty invoking Hollywood's revocation of this ideal in the image of the unattainable blonde bombshell. Much of the story of *Chicago* comprises a battle between these two ideals of women's desirability and, in particular, the attempt by Roxie–Monroe to supplant Velma–Brooks. However, both are brought to the realization that the war is futile: neither can defeat the other and, moreover, they are necessary to each other. The dark and the light, the innocent and the wise must learn to dance together – they are the indivisible 'double act' of women's success in the modern world and each is required by the other to transform themselves from nobody into somebody, to make something (culturally) out of nothing (materially).

We are not suggesting that *Chicago* exhausts the actual range of stereotypes or typifications of women's desirability that circulate through Hollywood cinema – let alone all the other mass cultural forms relevant to an exploration of this topic. But we do think that our analysis poses an interesting question about the aesthetic and sensual background to Robby Wideman's desire to possess the 'finest woman' or, in another case invoked by Katz, to the 'stick-up man' John Allen's boast that he kept a 'stable of broads' (and many other instances described in Katz's (1988) book). Wideman's desire is indeed, as Katz notes, 'continuous with the structure of fantasy worlds' (p. 74) but those fantasy worlds are not empty vessels filled with particular seductions and dreams only in the immediate context of the criminal act. Wideman's desire is no more culturally innocent than his hustling, violence and theft are morally or socially innocent. A fantasy of the finest woman on the set is not an abstract expression or a formless hallucination: it has empirical contents which, had Katz investigated them, would undoubtedly have revealed their decidedly conventional origins. What is Wideman's *personal* fantasy of the finest woman on the set if not an invocation of a solidified *cultural* reality? It may be that the seductions of a crime are sensed most intensely in the instance of its execution but the possibility of the finest woman on the set being a seduction in the first place is predicated on the real existence of myths of women's beauty, desirability, allure and availability. Even more than this, the possibility of *realizing* the fantasy is predicated on yet another

background cultural figure: that of being a 'somebody' who possesses the resources, the status and the personal charisma to 'freak her right off' (Katz, 1988: 244) – in other words, to impose an impressive character upon the finest woman.

Thus, through the Monroe icon, the film viciously targets another Hollywood stereotype, which might be seen to lie at the heart of American self-narration: that of the 'Everyman'. In *Chicago* the Everyman is Amos Hart (played by John C. Reilly), Roxie's good-hearted and easy-going husband, who even confesses to murder in order to save his wife from prison. Amos declares his 'ordinariness' to the audience in an act in which he calls himself 'Mr Cellophane', a transparent and uninteresting fellow that no one (including his wife) notices. His attire in the one-man show he performs in the film is clearly that of Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977), yet another cult figure of the American cinema of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, Amos Hart becomes Chaplin's persona of the 'tramp', one of the most ambivalent figures in early American cinema: both struggling to survive by any means and prone to love those weaker and more vulnerable than himself. One should certainly not ignore the fact that Amos's invisibility, incompetence, naïvety and conventionality are 'coloured' by the alluring Flynn, who constantly calls him 'Andy': 'Amos 'n' Andy', two characters played by Freedman Gosden and Charles Gorrell, were known from their daily broadcast comic programme during the American Depression. Later, their acting and their 'jokes' were condemned as vicious racial stereotyping that targeted black populations. Oscillating between vaudeville and modern theatre double acts, the 'Amos 'n' Andy' show ended up stressing white intellectual supremacy over black stupidity and incompetence (Ely, 1991). Amos is rendered 'black' in the eyes of the viewer, the ultimate American 'loser', the 'underdog' of a society in which honesty and good heart have no place. Amos's very ordinariness, however sympathetically evoked in his Chaplin emulation, signifies the unbridgeable distance between Mr Average America and the celebrated stars whose deeds and misdeeds are daily and hourly injected into the cultural maelstrom of a mass mediated society. His character gives cultural solidity to the knowledge that a nobody cannot touch, let alone possess, glamour: nobody is as nobody does and the more Amos refuses to jump aboard the bandwagon of Roxie's celebrity, to grab a piece of the action, the more he is isolated, degraded and demeaned.

This cultural condition of the nobody – the non-entity who refuses participation in the deceitful game – is found embedded in accounts of what it means to belong to deviant groups and Katz (1988: 143–4) explores precisely the seductive role of the nobody in the ostentatious parading of street gangs. Anonymous passers-by are used by the gangs as an audience for their street celebrity, a means of distinguishing, through set-piece visual and verbal rituals, their superior status *vis à vis* the ordinariness of a 'mass of observers'. To be a 'somebody', 'to be known, to gain this certain respect' (Keiser, 1979, cited in Katz, 1988: 144) means constructing sufficient others as unknowns, nobodies, respectless masses of conventional citizens lacking the capacity to celebrate their uniqueness. That the 'somebodies' of the street gangs need the 'nobodies' of the 'straight' world is not a dependence disconnected from larger cultural frameworks. The dependence is an intrinsic, and intricate, element of how celebrity functions on the wider cultural scene. Understanding the sensual and emotional attraction of any particular instance of ostentation and display of membership needs a grasp of where and how that

ostentation and display resonates with its cultural background – certainly in terms of the specificity of this or that gang culture but also in terms of how that specificity articulates broader cultural themes.

As we have seen, being a male 'somebody,' carries symbolic resonances that extend beyond the immediacy of lived deviance and beyond the synchrony of deviant displays. These resonances include specific and identifiable myths of women's desirability, allure and availability and fantasies of masculine control over women's sexuality. They resonate also with an awareness of structures of class and 'race' and the limited legitimate opportunities for achieving certain kinds of self worth that these structures impose. But they can also be seen to imbue that self worth with conservative contents and to reinforce an unbridgeable symbolic distance between the unconventional 'somebodies' and the docile 'nobodies' of modern society.[7] The cultural artefact of being 'somebody' – realizing a self who exists beyond the mundane plane of intensionality – appears to be an abiding theme of criminal narratives both in the synchrony of lived deviance and in the extended diachrony of deviant messages.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have argued that there may indeed be something 'cultural' about crime's phenomenal foreground but that its cultural dimensions are articulated through extensional as well as intensional planes of reference. We have concentrated on Katz's (1988) book because it represents the clearest and fullest statement of the impact of the phenomenal foreground on the experience of and motivations for crime. In this respect, we have gone back to Katz to explore the possibility of moving forwards towards a fuller cultural account of the character of crime's foreground. We have used a film analysis of a crime narrative that has resonated across generations and societies as a means of illustrating the kinds of insights that might emerge when the analytic framework applied to crime's foreground is applied to its symbolic background. Doing this reveals that 'emotions', 'moral artefacts', 'desires' and 'aspirations' have cultural and sociological contents that express abiding and unfolding features of wider cultural circumstances. They are not distinct from constructions of sexuality, 'race' and class, for example, but are graspable through the diachronically embedded narratives of the meanings of identity and status built on and through these narratives. Our article represents a provisional engagement with the possibility of co-articulating the sensual and symbolic power of the foreground and background of criminal experiences. A programme of research dedicated to descriptions of crime's cultural background that are as detailed and 'thick' as those applied to its foreground may be able to elucidate some of the cultural contents of that foreground and, thereby, supplement the analysis of forms that cultural criminology's ethnographic practitioners have recently emphasized. Of course, much more work will need to be done before these kinds of connections between crime and culture can be made with any confidence – which suggests that the long and winding road of cultural criminology (Presdee, 2004) is not behind it; it stretches into the future beyond any currently visible temporal horizon.

Notes

1 In fact, there is some need to clear up the question of whether cultural criminology deals with a 'late modern' society (the British version, following Jock Young) or a 'post modern' society (the American version, following Jeff Ferrell). We do not have the space to address this, here, but we think it represents a critical theoretical dissonance between two cultural contexts of intellectual labour.

2 Roxie Hart was another real person innocently caught up in a different murder in 1913. Watkins's substitution of Hart's name for Annan's cleverly captures the innocence/guilt duality portrayed by *Chicago*'s lead character.

3 Velma Kelly's character is based on Belva Gaertner, a cabaret singer and also-acquitted murderess of the 1920s who posed for photographs with Annan in the early stages of the latter's trial.

4 Cicero is Velma Kelly's prison nickname. It refers to the name of the hotel where her crime was committed.

5 We omit the character Ah-Ah (Katalin Helinski played by Ekaterina Chtchelkanova) here who portrays herself as literally devoid of guilt for her crime and whose protestations of innocence result in her death by hanging.

6 Brooks' career was overshadowed by her role in the classic German film *Pandora's Box* (1929), in which she played Lulu. Lulu is a cabaret singer who lures and destroys lonely or sexually repressed men she encounters, but eventually finds her match in Jack the Ripper, by whose hand she dies.

7 Or, in the words of one of Ferrell's (1996: 176) respondents, between those who 'act on [their] feelings' and the cultural 'sheep' of the mainstream.

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